

History of Obama's Support for US Special Forces Operations and Drone Strikes. Massive Civilian Deaths Categorized as "Collateral Damage"

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In 2007 and 2008 Barack Obama had altogether raised more than 3 times as much money from financial institutions and bankers, in comparison to his Republican Party rival John McCain. Obama's election campaign was furnished with millions of dollars from America's major banks like Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, Citigroup and Merrill Lynch.

Obama's election victory in November 2008 was not chiefly due to promises that he made but, as is the case with all US presidential elections in recent decades, was because of the amount of cash that he acquired. Former president Jimmy Carter (1977-81) said 10 years ago, "We have one of the worst election processes in the world right in the United States of America, and it's almost entirely because of the excessive influx of money".

Overall, it could be argued reasonably enough that Obama did not prove as aggressive as his predecessor, George W. Bush. Two European states joined the US-led NATO military organisation during the Obama era, compared to 7 during the Bush years. Regarding the 2 countries which did accede to NATO in the Obama presidency, Albania and Croatia in April 2009, the groundwork for that had been laid by Bush. Yet the White House's goal under Obama was to maintain and if possible increase US hegemony, through armed force if necessary.

In one regard Obama chose more harmful actions than Bush, relating to the field of drone warfare and their deployment in different countries to kill people. Between 2004 and the start of 2015, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) executed 413 drone strikes against Islamic militants, along with targeting those who were mere suspects; some of the victims were innocent bystanders, "collateral damage" Washington would say. Of the 413 drone strikes launched by the CIA in the above decade, 362 of them were carried out under the Obama administration (Obama became president in January 2009, ending in January 2017).

A Washington-based think tank, the New America Foundation, reported that Bush ordered

between 45 to 50 drone attacks in his 8 year tenure (2001-09), which killed 477 people. About half way through the Obama presidency, his administration had ordered 316 drone strikes by then which killed at least 2,363 people.

The New America Foundation admits these figures are most likely an underestimation. Rather than the number being 2,363, it may amount to more than 3,400 dead, including 307 civilians, with the victims present in nations like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen and Somalia. It should be mentioned that – as opposed to the Americans – Russia has deployed drones on a smaller scale, for surveillance purposes and to undermine critical infrastructure and military equipment in the Ukraine war.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said in February 2013 that the real death toll from US drone strikes is higher again. “We’ve killed 4,700”, Graham was quoted as saying, despite him having supported the use of drones to target humans. At the beginning of 2012 the Americans had in operation over 7,000 drones. In Pakistan alone, from 2004 to 2011, between 2,347 and 2,956 people were killed in US drone attacks which was reported by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, headquartered in London. The majority of the drone assaults in that 7 year period in Pakistan occurred from 2009, when Obama entered office.

According to historian Moniz Bandeira,

“Barack Obama took charge of the selection process, picking targets from a top secret ‘kill list’ drafted by the intelligence services (NSA, CIA, etc.), including the names of terrorists or suspected terrorists (capture was only theoretical), using unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), drones, or Navy SEAL Team 6 (ST6)”.

Many of those killed in Pakistan by US drones in the above years were militants; but, as elsewhere, there were hundreds of civilian casualties including serious loss of life inflicted upon children. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism reported that from 2004 to 2011 at least 393 civilians in Pakistan were killed in US drone attacks, including around 175 children.

The US military invasions and drone assaults, rather than leading to a reduction of terrorism worldwide, resulted in a significant increase. More than a decade after president Bush had announced his “war on terror”, in 2014 no less than 13,463 terrorist attacks occurred that year globally. In 2015, there were 11,002 casualties from terrorism in just one nation, Afghanistan.

American authorities felt the drone to be the cheapest, safest and most accurate means of eradicating their declared enemies. Washington’s international drone assassination campaign is something of an undeclared war, and president Obama had made drone attacks the hallmark of his “anti-terror strategy”.

The US has not won a major war since their defeat of Japan in 1945. Obama ordered an additional 30,000 American troops to Afghanistan in December 2009, in the hope of securing a military victory there but it failed. The Americans possessed neither the military capabilities or understanding of Afghanistan to accomplish victory. Obama boasted in May 2014 that “Our military has no peer”, and yet the US Armed Forces could not subdue either Afghanistan or Iraq, two mostly defenceless countries.

Obama had planned military action against Syria in 2013, under the pretext of accusations of chemical warfare by the government of Bashar al-Assad. The Obama administration

provided no evidence of chemical weapon usage by Assad's forces, nor could any proof be found, which UN investigators admitted. President Assad even informed the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) as to the exact location of the chemical weapons in Syria, an agreement which was met with the approval of the UN Security Council, and that frustrated Obama's plans for an invasion of Syria.

Since 2012, US personnel from the CIA, Special Operations Forces (SOF), Navy SEALs, and the Blackwater private military company, were providing training to jihadists in Jordan, before sending them across the border to Syria in order to fight against Assad's soldiers. For example, in early March 2013 around 300 jihadists trained by the US special forces entered Syria from Jordan.

Obama was warned by his Secretary of Defense, Leon Panetta, that Syria would be a more difficult target than Libya. The terrain of Syria was more heavily armed than that of Libya, and the Syrians had the support of Russia which was supplying president Assad with modern air defence systems. Washington estimated that between 75,000 to 90,000 American troops would be needed in Syria, almost as much as they had in Afghanistan, so as to secure Washington's goal of regime change in Damascus.

A US aerial bombing campaign against Syria would have been unlikely to change the strategic scenario. In addition, there was hardly any support within Syria for US military involvement, whereas there was considerable backing in Syria for a Russian presence there. Unlike in Libya too, the Americans would have risked confrontation in Syria with Russia and Iran.

As with Obama's drone campaign, he surpassed Bush in the regularity with which he deployed US military elite units, such as the Special Operations Forces (SOF), and the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). Obama sent the JSOC to conduct covert operations to liquidate Islamic fighters, or anyone else deemed an enemy, in states like Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and Sudan. Obama's government made such extensive use of covert actions with elite forces, that it was difficult to distinguish between Washington's secret operations and activities pursued by the CIA.

Comprising part of the Joint Special Operations Command are the Navy SEAL Team Six. In the first year of Obama's presidency, the Navy SEAL Team Six killed 675 people, and in 2011 they eliminated another 2,200. US lieutenant-colonel John Nagl said that, during a 90 day period in 2010, soldiers of the US Special Operations Command (SOCOM) carried out 3,000 combat missions, as they infiltrated villages in Afghanistan usually in the middle of the night.

The night raids were carried out primarily with the observational assistance of MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper drones, which were controlled by the CIA and armed with AGM-114 Hellfire missiles. The US Special Operations Command were often executing these missions alongside the CIA, and the latter were operating increasingly as a paramilitary force.

On top of the CIA's usual spying and intelligence gathering, they were involved in many of the tasks performed by the US Special Operations Forces, in regions such as the Middle East and Africa. This was outlined in a secret presidential finding signed by Bush on 17 September 2001, which authorised the CIA to create teams to apprehend or kill designated individuals.

President Obama signed executive orders or findings to sanction targeted killings or other covert actions, without having to go to the Congress. In mid-2010, about 18 months into Obama's presidency, it was reported in the Washington Post that the US Special Operations Forces – which like the other elite units comprise part of the US Armed Forces – were operating in 75 countries, 60 more than at the end of Bush's tenure. Obama had intensified US covert actions; he expanded the “war on terror”, retitled under Obama as “overseas contingency operations”.

In late 2011 Obama dispatched 100 American soldiers from the Special Operations Command to central Africa, ostensibly to assist the Ugandan authorities in the search for Joseph Kony, who Western media outlets have described as “one of the world's most wanted warlords”. For many years Kony has been the leader of the armed rebel organisation, the Lord's Resistance Army. Kony was never found and is reportedly alive and well today. One of Obama's real goals in Africa, however, was to increase the US military presence on that continent by establishing bases such as in Ethiopia, Djibouti and South Sudan.

Obama ordered a 5.7% increase of the budget for the US Special Operations Forces in 2011, raising it to \$6.3 billion. The US Special Operations Forces had 13,000 active duty soldiers overseas, including perhaps 9,000 altogether in Afghanistan and Iraq. Between April 2010 and April 2011, the US Special Operations Forces killed 3,200 insurgents and captured 800.

The US was operating two capture/kill campaigns in Yemen, a strategically placed country between the Gulf of Aden and oil rich Saudi Arabia. One of Washington's capture/kill operations in Yemen was overseen by the CIA using drones, and the other has been executed by US elite forces from the Joint Special Operations Command.

One drone strike in late September 2011, using a Hellfire missile, killed a number of people in Yemen, including the American-born Anwar al-Awlaki, which proved controversial in Washington only because of his country of birth. Al-Awlaki had been placed on the kill list with Obama's approval, because of his purported terrorist activities. On 14 October 2011 Al-Awlaki's teenage son Abdulrahman al-Awlaki, also born in America, was killed in another US drone attack in Yemen. The tragedy for the Al-Awlaki family continued when Nawar al-Awlaki, an eight-year-old child and daughter of Anwar al-Awlaki, was killed on 29 January 2017 in a military raid sanctioned by the Trump administration.

Hundreds of soldiers from the US Special Operations Forces have been stationed at the American military base in Djibouti, east Africa, called Camp Lemonnier. There they have worked under cover, concealing their identities as they co-ordinated the flight paths of the drones to nearby countries. The Camp Lemonnier base is of strategic importance because it is located between east Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, while American involvement there allows them access to the Indian Ocean and Red Sea.

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